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Alms Bowl Upside Down

by Marisa Handler

Very slowly, placing our attention in each foot as it descended to the sidewalk, we moved down San Francisco's main thoroughfare. Market Street was its usual noisy conflagration of traffic and advertisements, businesspeople and shoppers. In silence we walked amid them, clad in swathes of crimson fabric, our signs held high. In support of our brave friends in Burma. May ALL beings be free from suffering.

I have participated in countless demonstrations, sung and spoken over numerous loudspeakers, handed out scores of flyers. But this time was different. Typically those who aren't with us avoid us: passers-by chatter determinedly into their cellphones as they advance, shake their heads vociferously at flyers, veer around us. But this time it was as if our silence was contagious. Conversations died on lips. People peered at us as we approached, wondering. They accepted the flyers we held out. They stopped to read them, nodding. They took photos. On we went, silently and slowly, around a hundred of us, a beautifully-painted banner of the Buddha's eyes at our head.

We were doing walking meditation down Market Street at noon on a Monday. Jack Kornfield, an erstwhile monk in Burma, offered us instruction in the practice before we began. At our head was Roshi Blanche Hartman, her bowl turned upside down.

It was October 1st, 2007: the 138th anniversary of Gandhi's birth, and just over a week after the historical uprisings in Burma. The Saffron Revolution began because the military junta ruling Burma dramatically raised the prices of fuel and basic commodities, rendering them prohibitively expensive for many Burmese. In response, fifty thousand monks marched in Rangoon. They held their alms bowls upside down: a powerful message of excommunication to the Tatmadaw, or Burmese armed forces. As they marched, they chanted the Metta Sutra: May all human beings be free and happy, may all human beings be free from danger, may all human beings be free from physical and mental suffering, may all human beings be free from fear and anger.

Greatly inspired by this example of profoundly nonviolent protest, several of us began to organize in solidarity. What emerged in the Bay Area was an amazing coalition of Burmese activists, Buddhist activists and supporters. We held sitting meditations outside the Chinese embassy (China being the major trading partner of the Burmese regime). When the Olympic torch came to San Francisco en route to China, five hundred of us held a walking meditation across the Golden Gate Bridge. In response to the uprisings, the military regime in Burma had cracked down brutally on monks and civilians alike. Here in San Francisco, we were free, and we were safe. It was the least we could do to express our immense admiration of their courage and our support of their cause; we could only hope that the images and stories of our

organizing reached our beleaguered comrades. You are not alone, we were saying. We too believe that authentic change can only be brought about by means identical with the ends they seek to create. We too strive to be the change we wish to see in the world.

Our actions may or may not have benefited the Burmese. I do know that I myself benefited. I had been organizing and singing and writing for peace and global justice for many years, and I had simultaneously been a longtime practitioner of the dharma; my adult life had been an increasing coming-together of these at times diverging threads. I had been part of too many demonstrations that disenchanted me with their rage and blame and righteousness. I had sat countless hours in sanghas that seemed unconcerned with linking personal spiritual evolution to a vision of social justice, of collective evolution. If you build it, they will come, I learned in 2007; and there are many, indeed, who care enough to come.

In 2008 I published a memoir of my experiences as a nonviolent activist and writer, and this gave me the opportunity to speak and write extensively on these issues. It's not enough to act, I found myself saying over and over again. It's not enough to meditate, to work on personal growth. It has to be both. We have to work on ourselves and on the world. We live in interesting times indeed—times of climate change, and corporate globalization, and unprecedented abundance matched by unprecedented imbalance—and, in short, the need is too great to do otherwise. If we work only on the world, we risk being dominated by our anger and grief and fear, and serving to inadvertently replicate the violence inherent to the systems we wish to change. (History, I might point out, is replete with revolutions that served simply to instate the next oppressive regime.) Yet if we work only on ourselves, we fail to respond to our interconnection; we fail to actualize the growth we seek; and we abandon a planet crying for help. We cannot wait until we are enlightened to act. No matter how far we may try to run, we are complicit in the systems that are destroying the planet and maintaining vast human imbalance. Yet in that very complicity lies our salvation: the greater our participation, the greater the opportunity for change—whether that means starting an NGO or paying fifty cents more for free trade and organic.

"Nothing is true that forces one to exclude," wrote Camus. A spiritual practice divorced from a vision of social justice is, I would argue, a seriously flawed practice. If the goal of spiritual practice is to foster love and wisdom, then we must love wisely: we must strive to love all, thereby acknowledging that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," as King said. Every human being experiences love, no matter how much we may also hate, or resent, or fear. The question is where the boundary lies. Where do we draw the circle of our compassion? Around self, family, community, tribe, world? How do we determine what lies beyond its



Roshi Blanche Hartman marches down Market Street in San Francisco, her bowl turned upside down, in protest of historical uprisings in Burma.

bounds? ...For beyond, in the arid flatlands, lies the Other. Call her what you will. Republican, anarchist, lesbian, Nazi, 1%, racist, bum. Wherever we fail to see the human, we risk killing, in our hearts if not in actuality. A love like this is far from weak: the compassionate response to a ruthless dictator may mean life imprisonment. But it nonetheless seeks to identify the human within the dictator, to see the being as separate from his ideology. This is King's "love that does justice."

Six years ago I visited the Sarayacu, an indigenous community in Ecuador's southern Amazon that nonviolently (and ultimately successfully) prevented a European oil company from drilling on their land. When I visited to cover the story for *Orion* magazine and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, they were still fighting for their land and heritage. I interviewed a local shaman, asking him what he thought of the CEO and directors of this company. He opened his arms in a wide gesture, including everything in their circle. "We are rich," he said. "We have the jungle, our culture. As for them?" He considered the sky, the thick living foliage around us. "I think they live far from real knowledge," he said. There was no hatred in his words, no blame. There was a simple recognition of ignorance. They had failed to prioritize what really mattered. They were out of touch with wisdom.

In Buddhism, teachers speak of the two "wings of the dove": wisdom and compassion. Awareness and love. It is vital to foster both: awareness to see clearly into the nature of being, and compassion to hold what is seen with love. A sincere practice in either ultimately leads to the other, to the unifying Absolute behind the paradoxical relative. "Wisdom is knowing I am nothing," said Nisargadatta Maharaj. "Love is knowing I am everything, and between the two my life moves." For those of us still on the path to awakening, a wise spirituality requires practice in both of these elements, or it risks becoming cold (awareness without compassion) or insipid (love without wisdom). Thus can our spiritual practice nourish our work in the world; and our work in the

world, presuming we engage with both the thorny issues and the fallible beings working on them, can offer considerable challenge, and thereby nourishment, to our spiritual practice.

"Asking, we walk," say the Zapatistas, and to me this mantra implies great faith. We move even as we hold our questions, and our fears, and our resentments—and, crucially, all the while: we listen. We listen to ourselves and to each other and to this earth. We listen deeply, beyond the clamor of the gadgets and soundbites, below the endless array of opaque surfaces that clutter our culture. We remove ourselves, and we quiet down, and we listen. We hold what we see with love, and through silence we let it speak to us.

Then we stand up, and we join, and we act. We create. We practice what we have learned, and we bring new learning into our practice.

Listening and creating. Solitude and collaboration. Transcendence and immanence. Practice and action. The sky and the earth. The absolute and the relative.

And between the two our lives move.

Marisa Handler was born in Cape Town, South Africa and immigrated to the US in 1988. Along the way she lived in Israel and backpacked around Southern Africa, the Middle East, Europe, South Asia and South America. She was active in organizing the global justice movement, the anti-war movement and a just peace for Israel-Palestine. She freelanced as a journalist and foreign correspondent. The title of her first book tells it all, *Loyal to the Sky: Notes of an Activist*. She currently speaks and sings about visionary social change. *Dark Spike* is her first full-length album. She received a Fulbright fellowship in creative writing to India in 2010. She now teaches creative writing and songwriting at California Institute of Integral Studies. Ultimately, she says, whether writing, singing, speaking or teaching... it's all a love song.

